

CHAPTER 13

FREUD AND THE BIOGRAPHY
OF ANTIQUITY

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‘There is’, Sigmund Freud tells us in his psychobiography of the great artist, ‘only one place in his scientific notebooks where Leonardo [da Vinci] inserts a piece of information about his childhood’.¹ In the course of a discussion of the mechanics of the flight of vultures, Leonardo interjects this anecdote:

It seems that I was always destined to be so deeply concerned with vultures; for I recall as one of my very earliest memories that while I was in my cradle a vulture came down to me, and opened my mouth with its tail, and struck me many times with its tail against my lips.²

This single and fleeting vista onto the childhood of Leonardo acts for Freud as a key to unlocking what Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz will call ‘the riddle of the artist’.³ As Freud writes at the start of his biographical sketch: ‘Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519) was admired even by his contemporaries as one of the greatest men of the Italian renaissance; yet in their time he had already begun to seem an enigma, just as he does to us to-day’.⁴ It is hardly surprising that Freud, whose biography of the artist is billed from its opening phrase as a piece of ‘psychiatric research’, should be concerned with Leonardo’s childhood. But in this case it is not merely Freud but Leonardo himself who sees this childhood memory as key to understanding the obsessions of the mature artist: ‘it seems I was always destined to be so deeply concerned . . .’. The anecdote related to Leonardo’s creative awakening does not arise from a retrospective account of his life written by one of his admirers but instead forms part of his own autobiographical musings.

Childhood, as Kris and Kurz observe, forms a privileged site in the construction of the artist’s biography. In analysing a

succession of ancient and early modern stories recounted in the biographical traditions of artists, Kris and Kurz discern a universal pattern which ultimately gives rise to the 'heroization of the artist'. In a pattern which Leonardo evidently follows, an event from early childhood is seen to hold the key to understanding later greatness. With its explicit debt to psychoanalysis, Kris and Kurz's study draws attention not only to Freud's impact on the study of biography more generally but also to the important role that the biographies of antiquity would play in Freud's account of individual and collective lives. They openly take their cue from Freud when they argue that: 'the universal interest in everything reported about the childhood and youth of exceptional persons has deep roots in the human mind'.⁵ In Kris and Kurz's discussion, it is the universality of this pattern which, in part, prevents one from regarding these stories as straightforwardly factual. Although all anecdotes associated with the life of the artist may be marked by their fictionality, it is the ones which relate to the birth or early childhood of creative figures which are perhaps treated with the greatest suspicion.

For Freud, it is the nature of childhood memory, as such, which calls for scepticism. So he writes of Leonardo's tale: 'what we have here is a childhood memory; and certainly one of the strangest sort. It is strange on account of its content and on account of the age to which it is assigned.'⁶ Freud raises doubts about the possibility of being able to recollect a memory which goes back to one's 'suckling period' but he is even more doubtful about the veracity of this particular tale: 'What Leonardo asserts . . . sounds so improbable, so fabulous, that another view of it, which at a single stroke puts an end to both difficulties, has more to commend it to our judgement'.⁷ The content of Leonardo's memory is so elaborate in its improbability, so blatant in its fictionality that it cannot be understood as a *mere* memory: 'On this view the scene with the vulture would not be a memory of Leonardo's but a phantasy, which he formed at a later date and transposed to his childhood'.⁸

By the time that he wrote his account of Leonardo in 1910, Freud had already thought a great deal about the nature of

childhood memories. Already in 1899 Freud had written an essay entitled 'Screen Memories' which he elaborated in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901).⁹ The content of 'screen memories' seemingly relates to early childhood but what this content conceals is a traumatic mental experience which has occurred later in life. It is this retroactive dimension of such memories which proves crucial to unveiling their real psychological importance. In the *Psychopathology*, Freud constructs his analysis of screen memories around an example drawn from his own biography: a memory of standing and screaming in front of a cupboard door held open by his elder half-brother just as his mother walked in. It is the triviality of this screen memory (a character that Freud explains is a feature of many screen memories) which stands out in contrast to Leonardo's fantastical story. But while Freud's own memory is firmly rooted in the psychopathology of everyday life, it does not prevent him from gesturing towards the mythical quality of such memories:

One is thus forced by various considerations to suspect that in the so-called earliest childhood memories we possess not the genuine memory-trace but a later revision of it, a revision which may have been subjected to the influences of a variety of later psychical forces. Thus the 'childhood memories' of individuals come in general to acquire the significance of 'screen memories' and in doing so offer an analogy with the childhood memories that a nation preserves in its store of legends and myths.¹⁰

Through this enigmatic statement Freud constructs an analogy between the individual child and the childhood of humanity writ large. What the 'screen memory' of the cupboard door is to the young Sigmund, the myth of Romulus and Remus, say, might be to the Roman nation. The search for this kind of analogy between the individual case history and the history of mankind is one which pervades many of Freud's texts.¹¹

But it is in the Leonardo essay that Freud expands on the particular analogy between childhood memories and national histories most extensively:

Quite unlike conscious memories from the time of maturity, they [childhood memories] are not fixed at the moment of being experienced and afterwards

repeated, but are only elicited at a later age when childhood is already past; in the process they are altered and falsified, and put in the service of later trends, so that generally speaking they cannot be sharply distinguished from phantasies. Their nature is perhaps best illustrated by a comparison with the way in which the writing of history originated among the people of antiquity.¹²

Freud argues that rather than being fixed and experienced at the moment of origin, childhood memories are only experienced retrospectively in (relative) maturity and are thus subject to the distortions of later thought processes and desires. To follow the kind of archaeological metaphor that Freud was fond of employing, the recovery of childhood memories does not involve the excavation of a historical object fixed in time, rather the process of discovery creates the very object of its quest. Childhood memories are the product of later rationalisations rather than the inert traces of past experience. The analogy with historical writing might at first sight, then, seem to stress the unreliability of historical accounts because of their non-contemporaneity with the events they narrate. The historian's account is subject to distortion because it is influenced by the pressures of his/her own day.

As he develops his argument, however, Freud seems to have something else in mind:

As long as a nation was small and weak it gave no thought to the writing of history. Men tilled the soil of their land, fought for their existence against their neighbours, and tried to gain territory from them to acquire wealth. It was an age of heroes, not of historians. Then came another age, an age of reflection: men felt themselves to be rich and powerful, and now felt the need to learn where they had come from and how they had developed. Historical writing, which had begun to keep a continuous record of the present, now also cast a glance back on the past, gathered traditions and legends, interpreted the traces of antiquity that survived in customs and usages and in this way created a history of the past.¹³

More than pointing out the shortcomings of historical accounts, Freud is interested in the motivation behind the development of the historical record. Small and weak nations have no interest in history: they are too caught up in the struggle for survival to give any thought to commemoration. Freud paradoxically

names this period the 'age of heroes' and argues that historians are the symptoms of an age which has outlived heroism. Those who can, do; those who can't write history. The age of the historians may be 'powerful and rich' but it is also an age which had lost its agency, its essential connection to the here and now. Historical writing is no longer a way of celebrating the living achievements of the nation; it has become a vehicle for the invention of tradition:¹⁴

It was inevitable that this early history should have been an expression of present beliefs and wishes rather than a true picture of the past; for many things had been dropped from the nation's memory, while others were distorted, and some remains of the past were given a wrong interpretation in order to fit in with contemporary ideas. Moreover people's motive for writing history was not objective curiosity but a desire to influence their contemporaries, to encourage and inspire them, or to hold a mirror up before them. A man's conscious memory of events of his maturity is in every way comparable to the first kind of historical writing [which was a chronicle of current events]; while the memories that he has of his childhood correspond, as far as their origins and reliability are concerned, to the history of a nation's earliest days, which was compiled later and for tendentious reasons.¹⁵

In singling out early historians for their lack of interest in giving a true picture of the past, Freud anticipates a later argument about historical writing which he makes in *Moses and Monotheism*: 'the people who had come from Egypt brought writing and the desire to write history along with them; but it was to be a long time before historical writing realized that it was pledged to unswerving truthfulness'.¹⁶ As Richard Armstrong and others have shown, 'psychoanalysis was born in dialogue with the larger considerations of historical consciousness from the nineteenth century'.¹⁷ More specifically, Armstrong has demonstrated how Freud developed his analytic model in dialogue with Barthold Niebuhr's investigation of Livy's early history of Rome. Livy wrote his monumental account of the origins of the Roman Republic at the height of the constitutional reforms of Augustus. He was separated from his material not only by a significant temporal disjuncture, but also by a profound shift in ideological orientation. In writing his own critical history of Rome, Niebuhr

would expose the fictionality of Livy's account and reveal how the legends answered the needs of the new nation rather than exposed the historical truth of the origins of Rome. Thus Niebuhr writes of a notorious passage from Book 1 of Livy's history where the monstrous Tullia rides over her father's mutilated corpse in her carriage: 'Tullia's crimes may be no less imaginary than those of Lady Macbeth'.¹⁸ This rationalising account of Roman history would have a profound effect on the development of both secular and religious historiography in the nineteenth century. 'What Niebuhr and Grote achieved for ancient history', writes Simon Goldhill, 'Strauss and Renan achieved for the biblical accounts: a critical Thucydidean intellectualism that challenged the status of stories, a belief in which was central to personal religious identity'.¹⁹

Freud was clearly attracted to this early nineteenth-century hermeneutics of suspicion and the extent to which he saw a parallel with the work of analysis becomes manifest in his later *Autobiographical Study* (1925). There he would analogise one of the key developments in his thinking, namely the abandonment of the 'seduction theory', to the application of critical history:

When I had pulled myself together, I was able to draw the right conclusions from my discovery: namely that the neurotic symptoms were not related directly to actual events but to wishful phantasies, and that as far as neurosis was concerned, psychical reality was of more importance than material reality ... It will be seen, then, that my mistake was of the same kind as would be made by someone who believed that the legendary story of the early kings of Rome (as told by Livy) was historical truth instead of what in fact it is – a reaction against the memory of times and circumstances that were insignificant and occasionally, perhaps, inglorious.²⁰

As Armstrong writes: 'When it comes to origins, we remember what we want to remember – this was the troubling assertion that Niebuhr raised to a methodological principle'.²¹ Niebuhr's critical history provided a model for Freud's analyses of childhood memory, which would in turn influence his understanding of historical questions such as the role of Moses in the development of Jewish monotheism.

But in the account of historical writing that Freud develops in *Moses and Monotheism* it is clear that distortion, fantasy

and repression are all integral to the 'desire to write history' as such: fantasy is, in other words, a constitutive part of the development of historical writing. In the *Leonardo* passage too, we see him identify the motivation to write history not in 'objective curiosity' but in some other need or desire. Yet, Freud wishes to maintain a distinction between earlier and later historical accounts in order to uphold the parallel with childhood and later memories. Childhood memories remain tendentious while the conscious memories of maturity produce a truer account of events.

Leonardo's story may parade its unreliability but it is merely an extreme example of a more general tendency of childhood memories. Rather than dismiss Leonardo's tale for its lack of authenticity, however, Freud instead uses it as an opportunity to illustrate the importance of fantasy:

Yet in underrating this story one would be committing just as great an injustice as if one were carelessly to reject the body of legends, traditions and interpretations found in a nation's early history. In spite of all the distortions and misunderstandings, they still represent the reality of the past: they are what a people forms out of their experience of its early days and under the dominance of motives that were once powerful and still operate today; and if it were only possible, a knowledge of all the forces at work, to undo these distortions, there would be no difficulty in disclosing the historical truth lying behind the legendary material. The same holds good for childhood memories or phantasies of the individual. What someone thinks he remembers from his childhood is not a matter of indifference; as a rule the residual memories – which he himself does not understand – cloak priceless pieces of evidence about the most important features in his mental development.²²

Freud carries the analogy through by claiming that Leonardo's story should hold the same prestige in relation to his mature development as Livy's historical account does in relation to the development of imperial Rome. In particular, although he seemingly draws a contrast between the unreliable motivations of the early historians/childhood memories and the purer objectivity of later historical accounts/adult memories, he nevertheless acknowledges that the very 'motives' which distorted the earlier stories are still operative today. No account is therefore neutral and fantasy continues to be a guiding

principle in the self-understanding of both the developed nation and the mature adult. In fact, rather than hold a lesser status, the more explicitly fantastical childhood memories turn out to be 'priceless'. It is as if the blatant fictionality of the anecdote offers the more privileged access to the identity of the nation or the mental development of the individual. Through the distorted fantasy of childhood, rather than through the objective, conscious memory of maturity, can the riddle of the artist be solved.

But if Freud makes the salience of Leonardo's suspect anecdote per lucidly clear, what function does the analogy between childhood memory and early historical writing perform for him? Throughout the development of psychoanalysis Freud had been interested in exploring the connections between individual and collective psychology. During his lifetime, he would often narrate the history of psychoanalysis in terms of its progression from self-analysis to the analysis of culture more broadly. Thus he wrote in a letter to Romain Rolland in 1936:

You know that the aim of my scientific work was to throw light upon unusual, abnormal or pathological manifestations of the mind – that is to say, to trace them back to the psychical forces operating behind them and to indicate the mechanisms at work. I began by attempting this upon myself and then went on to apply it to other people and finally, by a bold extension, to the human race as a whole.²³

The trajectory that Freud maps out for psychoanalysis from its beginnings in self-analysis to its *telos* by 'bold extension' to the analysis of 'the human race as whole', is a familiar one. Such a teleological account could certainly be mapped onto his works. If we take the *Interpretations of Dreams* (1900) and *Moses and Monotheism* (1939) as the bookends of Freud's psychoanalytic *oeuvre*, we could see a move from a work explicitly based in self-analysis in the wake of his father's death to a book which from its opening phrase announces its aspiration to analyse the Jewish people as a whole. The major works which deal most explicitly with cultural and historical topics, *Totem and Taboo* (1913), *Civilisation and its Discontents* (1930), *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), are concentrated in the second half of

his career and have a quite different focus to the *Studies in Hysteria* (1895). But as the example of the discussion of screen memories from the *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901/1907) shows, Freud had long been interested in thinking about individual psychology in relation to larger cultural and historical movements. As we saw, the analogy between childhood memories and the development of national histories was not a casual embellishment but rather a theme that Freud would return to compulsively. The single sentence in the *Psychopathology* becomes a several page exploration in *Leonardo* and would later arguably underpin the whole argument of Freud's *Moses and Monotheism*.

Freud not only frequently punctuated his texts with these analogies, he also had a methodological interest in exploring his own recourse to analogical thinking. This is perhaps most evident in the well-known passage from *Civilisation and its Discontents* where Freud again returns to Rome to explore the nature of human memory. As in the earlier passages we have been exploring, Freud is concerned with the question of the preservation and forgetting of memories. He introduces the analogy in a manner which has some striking similarities to the *Leonardo* passage:

Since we overcame the error of supposing that the forgetting we are familiar with signified a destruction of the memory-trace – that is, its annihilation – we have been inclined to take the opposite view, that in mental life nothing which has once been formed can perish – that everything is somehow preserved and that in suitable circumstances . . . it can once more be brought to light. Let us grasp what this assumption involves by taking an analogy from another field. We will choose as an example the history of the Eternal City.²⁴

Despite the continued focus on early memory, it is clear that Freud's thinking has to some extent moved on. Where *Leonardo* seems to suggest that early childhood memories are inaccessible to the adult mind, this passage puts an emphasis on the recoverability of even the most remote of childhood memories. This is, presumably, the reason why Freud again chooses Rome as his analogy; it highlights how even the most ancient memories – memories, for instance, of an infant at his

suckling stage – live on in the adult mind, even if they exist in distorted form:

Now let us, by flight of imagination, suppose that Rome is not a human habitation but a psychical entity with a similarly long and copious past – an entity, that is to say, in which nothing that has once come into existence will have passed away and all earlier phases of development continue to exist alongside the latest one. This would mean that in Rome the palaces of the Caesars and the Septizonium of Septimius Severus would still be rising to their old height on the Palatine and that the castle of S. Angelo would still carry on its battlements the beautiful statues which graced it until the siege by the Goths, and so on.²⁵

But almost as interesting as the elaborate and visually arresting parallel which Freud creates is its seemingly immediate disavowal. At the end of his description of Rome, Freud abruptly interjects: ‘there is clearly no point in spinning our phantasy any further, for it leads to things that are unimaginable and even absurd’.²⁶ Freud first of all has anxieties about the possibility of mapping historical sequence onto a spatial plane but he then specifically worries about the boldness of creating an equivalence between a psychical entity and such an explicitly cultural and historical construct: ‘The question may be raised why we chose precisely the past of a *city* to compare with the past of a *mind*’.²⁷ With uncharacteristic humility Freud concludes: ‘we bow to this objection; and abandoning our attempt to draw a striking contrast, we will turn instead to what is after all a more closely related object of comparison – the body of an animal or a human being’.²⁸ Freud seems to retreat from the realm of culture and history and return to the comfort of anatomy and biology. The individual human is thus best understood in relation to his bodily rather than his cultural and historical existence.

Although Freud’s medical training and unswerving commitment to the scientificity of psychoanalysis made him reluctant to actively celebrate the more humanistic aspects of his methodology, it is clear that culture and history formed an integral part of his project from the outset. More specifically, as all the analogies we have explored suggest, antiquity occupied a privileged place in Freud’s thought. As many recent studies have

shown, antiquity played a crucial role in the formulation of Freud's own theories.²⁹ As the references to Niebuhr's history indicate, Freud was profoundly indebted to approaches derived from classical philology. Jacques le Rider has argued that 'one can define psychoanalysis as an archaeology of the unconscious whose method was conceived on the model of philology'.³⁰ Perhaps, even more significantly, Freud placed the biographies of figures from antiquity at the core of his exploration of the human psyche. So even in the book most associated with his own self-analysis, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud is drawn to the store of ancient legend. His observation that we are all Oedipus inserted an ancient figure and his life into the narrative of all our biographies, starting with his own. Freud modelled the analysis of all lives on the specific experiences of a fictional character from antiquity. Moreover, in the examples that we have been exploring, Freud constructed an intricate analogy between the childhood of humanity in antiquity and the childhood memories of an individual. Just as human history is still working through the legacy of antiquity, so Freud's patients are still in the grips of their early childhood experiences. Oedipus stands metonymically both for the infancy of humanity and the infant within us all.

Freud's biography of Leonardo, as Daniel Orrells has shown, is an exemplary demonstration of the continuing role ancient mythical biographies play in the life of the later artist. Freud presents us with a Leonardo trapped between the alternative mythical typologies of Narcissus and Oedipus. As Orrells writes: 'the deluded, mythicizing self-longings of both Narcissus and Oedipus becomes exemplary for Freud's understanding of the internal myth-history of every little boy'. Leonardo's screen memory becomes the key to exploring his oscillating (sexual) identity. Moreover, the very content of Leonardo's memory is replete with mythical resonances. Freud is led directly from Leonardo's discussion of the vulture to the corpus of Egyptian mythology. Freud identifies Leonardo's vulture with the vulture-headed Egyptian goddess Mut: 'now this vulture-headed mother goddess was usually represented by

the Egyptians with a phallus; her body was female, as the breasts indicated, but it also had a male organ in a state of erection'.³¹ By equating the vulture's tale in Leonardo's anecdote simultaneously to his mother's teat and to the phallus, Freud finds a mythological parallel for Leonardo's phantasy in the phallic mother of Egyptian mythology. 'In the goddess Mut, then, we find the same combination of maternal and masculine characteristics as in Leonardo's phantasy of the vulture.'³² Both Orrells and Whitney Davis have written insightfully about the complex and paradoxical account of Leonardo's homosexuality which ensues from this identification.³³ Significantly, as Orrells shows most eloquently, it is Freud's deep immersion in ancient mythology which generates the ambivalence of his sexological diagnosis.

However, the complex relationship to his mother which Freud sees captured in the story of the vulture becomes a key not only to understanding Leonardo's adult sexuality but also more generally, and perhaps more importantly, to explaining his identity as an artist and a scientist. For at the core of Freud's study of Leonardo lies the insight that unresolved questions of sexuality are at the heart of his distinctive contributions to art and to science. It is precisely Leonardo's sublimation of his sexuality into his mental activities which is the preoccupation of Freud's text. Far from expressing his homosexuality through his choice of sexual partners, Freud sees an almost pathological repression of sexual desire: 'he appears as a man whose sexual need and activity were exceptionally reduced, as if a higher aspiration had raised him above the common animal need of mankind'.³⁴ 'He had succeeded', Freud concluded, 'in subjecting his feelings to the yoke of research'.³⁵ Freud thus pursues an analysis of Leonardo's art as the product of his sublimated sexuality:

Kindly nature has given the artist the ability to express his most secret mental impulses, which are hidden even from himself, by means of the works that he creates; and these works have a powerful effect on others who are strangers to the artist, and who are themselves unaware of the source of the emotion. Can it be that there is nothing in Leonardo's life work to bear witness to what his memory preserved as the strongest impression of his childhood?³⁶

Despite the tendency to associate psychoanalytic readings of art and literature with crude psychobiography, Freud remains circumspect about the possibility of uncovering Leonardo's repressed desires in his works of art. 'One would certainly expect there to be something', he continues:

Yet if one considers the profound transformations through which an impression in an artist's life has to pass before it is allowed to make its contribution to a work of art, one would be bound to keep any claim to certainty in one's demonstration within very modest limits; and this is especially so in Leonardo's case.³⁷

Freud's first port of call is the notoriously inscrutable smile of Mona Lisa. The puzzling smile produces both an interpretative crux and an adjective: 'Leonardesque'. Freud seems to question its association with a distinctively personal style by recalling 'the peculiar fixed smile found in archaic Greek sculptures – in those, for example, from Aegina'.³⁸ Rather than unlocking something unique about Leonardo, the enigmatic smile may speak to something more universal he suggests. Beguiled as no doubt Leonardo had been by it, Freud decides to 'leave unsolved the riddle of the expression on Mona Lisa's face'.³⁹ Rather he turns his attention to the uncanny reappearance of this mysterious facial expression in other paintings by Leonardo. In particular, he is drawn to the redoubling of the image in Leonardo's painting 'St Anne with Two Others' (Figure 13.1).

Freud is struck both by the similarity of the smiles to that of the Mona Lisa but also the loss of its unsettling inscrutability. He sees its mystery transfigured into an expression of maternal tenderness. But how is one to make sense of the reduplication of the maternal figure in this painting? Freud reviews numerous art historical interpretations that had been struck by the lack of differentiation in the ages of St Anne and her daughter the Virgin Mary. A clue to this confusion of generations, Freud believed, can be found in the specifics of Leonardo's biography:

Leonardo's childhood was remarkable in precisely the same way as this picture. He had two mothers: first his true mother Caterina, from whom he was torn away when he was between three and five, then a young and



Figure 13.1: Leonardo Da Vinci, *St. Anne with Two Others* (c.1508). Oil on wood. Louvre, Paris. Credit: Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY.

tender step-mother, his father's wife, Donna Albiera. By his combining this fact about his childhood with the one mentioned above (the presence of the mother and the grandmother) and by condensing them into a composite unity, the design of 'St. Anne and Two Others' took shape for him.⁴⁰

Leonardo's two female figures, then, are the reproduction of his unorthodox familial configuration. Freud thus discovers the figure of the mother lurking behind the enigmatic smiles of both these biblical figures and their Mona Lisa archetype. But Freud goes further in associating this picture with Leonardo's biography by making a direct connection to Leonardo's childhood memory:

After we have studied this picture for some time, it suddenly dawns on us that only Leonardo could have painted it, just as only he could have created the phantasy of the vulture. The picture contains the synthesis of the history of his childhood: its details are to be explained by reference to the most personal impressions of Leonardo's life.⁴¹

Freud sees himself anticipated by Walter Pater who had already associated Mona Lisa with Leonardo's childhood dreams. Pater had seen in the Mona Lisa a 'presence ... expressive of what in the ways of a thousand years men had come to desire' and he further remarked on 'the unfathomable smile, always with a touch of something sinister in it, which plays over all Leonardo's work'.⁴² But Freud particularises Pater's insight by making a direct connection between Leonardo's maternal childhood fantasies and the specific fantasy of the vulture. The 'sinister' dimension that Pater had identified is for Freud specifically linked to the threat of the vulture. As an embodiment of the phallic mother, the vulture represents the overbearing nature of maternal love. Leonardo's mother's love represented at once 'the promise of unbounded tenderness' and at the same time 'sinister menace'.⁴³ 'Like all unsatisfied mothers, she took her son in place of her husband, and by too early maturing of his eroticism robbed him of a part of his masculinity.'⁴⁴ Far from a beatific solace, the smile of St Anne and the Virgin represent the threat of castration. Perhaps it is the laugh of the Medusa which is suppressed by Mona Lisa's enigmatic smile?

Despite his initial hesitations about the correspondence between biographical details and the completed work of art, in a later edition of this text Freud is emboldened by 'a remarkable discovery' to go even further in his analysis. One of Freud's disciples Oskar Pfister discerned in Mary's 'curiously arranged and rather confusing drapery' the outline of a vulture (Figure 13.2).

The hidden bird in the folds of Mary's lap turns out to be an 'unconscious picture puzzle'.⁴⁵ In Freud/Pfister's reconstruction, the vulture's tail rests on the small child's shoulder gesturing provocatively towards his mouth. Freud thus sees Leonardo's phantasy woven into the fabric of the painting. The uncanny presence of the vulture in this scene of maternal love hints at the menace which laces all motherly affection.

The unconscious intrusion of the Egyptian phallic mother onto the biblical canvass functions in a similar way to the screen memory which Leonardo recounts in his notebooks.⁴⁶ In identifying Leonardo's childhood memory as an adult fantasy, Freud was able to subject it to the rigors of psychoanalytic analysis:

If we examine with the eyes of the psychoanalyst Leonardo's phantasy of the vulture, it does not appear strange for long. We seem to recall having come across the same sort of thing in many places, for example in dreams; so that we may venture to translate the phantasy from its own special language into words that are generally understood.⁴⁷

Just as Freud was able to translate the 'memory' into the language of dream symbols, so he is able to translate Leonardo's art into a psychoanalytic idiolect. The elaborate drapery of painterly virtuosity turns out to conceal the repressed sexual fantasy of the artist. But even in the absence of the more manifest symbol of the vulture, Leonardo's art is able to communicate its latent preoccupations. The 'Leonardesque' smile becomes the site of a repetition compulsion. From Leda to John the Baptist to Bacchus, 'the familiar smile of fascination leads one to guess that it is a secret of love. It is possible that in these figures Leonardo has denied the unhappiness of his erotic life and has triumphed over it in his art.'⁴⁸



Figure 13.2: Reworking of *St. Anne with Two Others* showing the outline of the 'vulture'. Credit: Wikimedia Commons.

To pose and answer aesthetic questions in terms of the relation of art to the artist, rather than to external nature, or to an audience, or to the internal requirements of the work itself, was the characteristic tendency of modern criticism up to a few decades ago ... This point of view is very young measured against the twenty-five-hundred-year history of the Western theory of art, for its emergence as a comprehensive approach to art, shared by a large number of critics, dates back not much more than a century and a half.⁴⁹

Writing in 1953, in the heyday of New Criticism, M.H. Abrams would argue that the desire to connect the meaning of an artwork to the artist was a direct product of Romanticism. It was the conception of the artist as a creative genius which gave way to what Abrams would call the 'expressive theory of art'. Declaring the year 1800 'a good round number' for its inauguration, Abrams characterises expressive theory in the following way: 'a work of art is essentially the internal made external, resulting from a creative process operating under the impulse of feeling, and embodying the combined product of the poet's perceptions, thoughts and feelings'.⁵⁰ Freudian psychoanalysis might on this schema emerge as the almost inevitable end-point of the Romantic preoccupation with the artist's inner world. In his analyses of art, as in so many other aspects of his work, Freud could lay claim to being the last Romantic. Freud's obsessive interest in biography seems at the very least to have perpetuated the Romantic investment in the lives of its artists. Perhaps more than this, Freudian psychoanalysis might be seen to have given the Romantic intuition a full-blown *theory*. After Freud, one could argue, it became impossible *not* to relate the artwork to the inner most workings of the artist's mind. If the 'expressive theory of art' is a marker of Romantic modernity, it is even more a characteristic of the post-Freudian twentieth century.

Yet, to explore Freud's most sustained foray into psychobiography is to be confronted at once with something more ancient and more modern. Freud's account of Leonardo finds its source in an anecdote which could have come straight out of the life of an ancient artist. As Armstrong puts it: 'Just as bees were said to have coated the infant Plato's lips with honey as a

portent of his eloquence, Leonardo's "writing so distinctly about the kite" was foretold by the feather (i.e. the quill pen) placed between his lips, the bodily locus of eloquence'.⁵¹ But as Armstrong makes clear, although Freud's story may look indistinguishable from an ancient legend, his interpretation of it moves well beyond an ancient hermeneutic. And yet, behind his unmistakably modern language of 'screen memories', 'homosexuality' and 'phallic mothers' lurks a persistent reference to the ancient world. 'Screen memories' make no sense to Freud without Livy, Leonardo's 'homosexuality' reflects a conflict between Narcissus and Oedipus, and the phallic mother can only be understood as the Goddess Mut. By turning his quintessentially twentieth-century 'pathography' into a work of mythography, Freud literalises Kriz and Kurz's claim that legend, myth and magic are the universal attributes of the image of the artist. The artist who thus emerges from Freud's account is much more mythical than any of the creations of 'expressive theory'. Leonardo may be conflicted about his sexuality but he shares less with the tortured introspective poets of the Romantic period than he does with the heroes of antiquity. Not for nothing would Freud name Leonardo 'the first man since the Greeks to probe the secrets of nature'.⁵²

Although Freud's Leonardo is steeped in antiquity, he also looks forward to the age of post-Romantic criticism which Abrams was already hailing. Psychoanalysis, in an important way, anticipates the death of the author. While psychoanalysis maintains the focus on the author, it prepares the way to identifying the 'intentional fallacy' as a fallacy. The 'discovery' of the unconscious makes the author every bit as ignorant of his/her intentions as the readers are. To Freud, it makes no difference whether the vulture concealed in Mary's robes was intentionally placed there by Leonardo. In fact, the psychoanalyst is even more interested in its presence if the artist had no intention of placing it there. And although the vulture gives us an insight into the specifics of Leonardo's biography, Freud is equally interested in its ability to elicit and reflect the fantasies of its spectators. Similarly, like a good postmodern critic, Freud's very first reaction to the story from Leonardo's

biography is to question its veracity. A true precursor to Mary Lefkowitz, Freud immediately uncovers the fictionality of this biographical anecdote. In our ability to read ‘lives’ as finely wrought narrative constructs we are all heirs to a specifically Freudian ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’. But anticipating the work of Lefkowitz, Graziosi and others in this volume, Freud saw great value in these biographical fictions – not despite their fictionality but because of it.⁵³ It is only by recognising Leonardo’s memory as a fantasy that Freud can harness it to his analysis of his art.

Freud’s Leonardo exists on the threshold of antiquity and modernity. To Freud he was at once ‘the first modern’ and the ‘last Greek’. But Freud’s own methodology in his biographical sketch can also tell us something about the intersection between and ancient and modern lives. Although Freud devotes himself to understanding the enigma of Leonardo’s life in all its idiosyncratic specificity, his constant references to antiquity show us that Leonardo was always more than an individual. One person’s life, however exceptional that life might be, is never his or her life alone. Our lives and the narratives we tell about them are the products of culture and history not just individual psychologies. But what Freud and psychoanalysis more generally have shown is that despite the universality of certain narrative patterns, individuality still matters. This explains why the death of the author was shortly followed by his/her resurrection even if it was in a modified form. Lives provide a crucial explanatory factor for the specificity of an artist or his/her artwork. Mona Lisa’s smile will always be Leonardesque even as she reminds us of the statues of Aegina. And while Leonardo’s vulture may share something with Plato’s bees, Plato could never have painted ‘St Anne and Two Others’, just as Leonardo would make an unconvincing author of the *Republic*.

Notes

- 1 Freud *Standard Edition* (SE) XI, 82.
- 2 Quoted in Freud SE XI, 82.
- 3 Kris and Kurz (1979) 1.

- 4 Freud *SE* XI, 63.
- 5 Kris and Kurz (1979) 13.
- 6 Freud *SE* XI, 82.
- 7 Freud *SE* XI, 82.
- 8 Freud *SE* XI, 82.
- 9 For the early essay see Freud *SE* III, 301–23.
- 10 *SE* VI 47–8. Although *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* was published in 1901, Freud revised this chapter substantially in 1907. Both the biographical example and his comment about the analogy to myths and legends appear in the 1907 revisions.
- 11 See Gay (1985) and my own discussions in Leonard (2008) and (2012).
- 12 Freud *SE* XI, 83.
- 13 Freud *SE* XI, 83.
- 14 See Hobsbawm and Ranger (1992). While no mention is made of Freud, Hobsbawm seems to recall him when he writes: “‘Traditions’ which appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented’ (1).
- 15 Freud *SE* XI, 83–4.
- 16 Freud *SE* XXIII, 68.
- 17 Armstrong (2005) 160.
- 18 Niebuhr (1828) 332.
- 19 Goldhill (2011) 176.
- 20 Freud, *SE* XX, 34–5.
- 21 Armstrong (2005) 165.
- 22 Freud *SE* XI, 84.
- 23 Freud *SE* XXII, 239.
- 24 Freud *SE* XXI, 69.
- 25 Freud *SE* XXI, 70.
- 26 Freud *SE* XXI, 70.
- 27 Freud *SE* XXI, 71.
- 28 Freud *SE* XXI, 71.
- 29 See Rudnytsky (1987); Le Rider (2002); Armstrong (2005); Bowlby (2007); Orrells (2011); and Zajko and O’Gorman (2013).
- 30 Le Rider (2002), back cover.
- 31 Freud *SE* XI, 94.
- 32 Freud *SE* XI, 94.
- 33 See Davis (1995) and Orrells (2011). Not the least of these paradoxes is the fact that Leonardo never actually talked about a ‘vulture’ – Freud seems to have been working from a German text of Leonardo’s notebooks which had mistranslated the Italian word ‘*nibio*’ which is a kite, not a vulture. See Strachey’s editorial note *SE* XI, 60–2. See also Andersen (2001).
- 34 Freud *SE* XI, 101.

- 35 Freud *SE* XI, 105.
- 36 Freud *SE* XI, 107.
- 37 Freud *SE* XI, 107.
- 38 Freud *SE* XI, 107, n. 2.
- 39 Freud *SE* XI, 109.
- 40 Freud *SE* XI, 113.
- 41 Freud *SE* XI, 112.
- 42 Pater (1873) 117–18 quoted in Freud *SE* XI, 110.
- 43 Freud *SE* XI, 115.
- 44 Freud *SE* XI, 117.
- 45 Freud *SE* XI, 115, n. 1.
- 46 Both Armstrong (2005) and Orrells (2011) 258–9 comment on the significance of Freud's interest in Egyptian mythology in the context of the increasingly racialised discourses of mythology and religion in this period.
- 47 Freud *SE* XI, 85.
- 48 Freud *SE* XI, 118.
- 49 Abrams (1960) 3.
- 50 Abrams (1953) 22.
- 51 Armstrong (2005) 67. Similar stories were told about other artists in antiquity, including Sophocles, who was called 'the bee' on account of his honey-like verse. See Lefkowitz in this volume.
- 52 Freud *SE* XI, 122.
- 53 Lefkowitz (1981); (2012); Graziosi (2002).